

HAWAI'I'S SEA TURTLES

H
o
n
u

(Green
sea turtle)

H
o
n
u
'
e
a

(Hawksbill
sea turtle)

Did you
know...

... sea turtles
cannot
retract their
heads or
flippers into
their shells.



Photo courtesy Lori Mazza ©1997

Hawai'i's Sea Turtles

Three species of sea turtles are considered native to Hawai'i: green, hawksbill, and leatherback. Two other species, the loggerhead and olive ridley, are sometimes observed in Hawaiian waters. The life span of sea turtles is unknown. They grow very slowly in the wild and take an average of 25 years to reach sexual maturity. Sea turtles are important to the culture and environment of Hawai'i. They are featured in Hawaiian mythology and petroglyphs, and as 'aumakua (personal family gods and guardians).

Green Sea Turtle (*Chelonia mydas*)

The green sea turtle is the most common sea turtle in Hawaiian waters. It feeds on marine plants in shallow coastal waters throughout the islands. Green sea turtles are primarily vegetarian and eat *limu* (algae) growing underwater on coral reefs and rocks in shallow coastal waters. These turtles grow to an adult breeding size of 200 pounds or more. Hawai'i's green sea turtles migrate once every 2-5 years across hundreds of miles of open ocean to mate and nest in the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands at isolated French Frigate Shoals. While Hawai'i's green sea turtle population has increased in recent years, they are still threatened from poaching, death by fishing gear and from *fibropapilloma* disease. This disease causes fibrous growths on the eyes, neck, flippers, and in the mouth. It is believed to be caused by a virus, and can be fatal to turtles.

ALL sea turtles, alive and dead, are protected by the Endangered Species Act.

This law makes it illegal to harass, disturb, harm, kill, or keep sea turtles in captivity without a permit, or sell any sea turtle parts or products.

Report any suspected violations to the NOAA Fisheries Enforcement at (800) 853-1964.

Report nesting or basking activities, and dead, sick, injured, or stranded turtles to the NOAA Fisheries Honolulu Lab at (808) 983-5730.

Hawksbill (*Eretmochelys imbricata*)

The hawksbill is also native to Hawai'i. This species is critically endangered and it is believed that very few of these turtles remain in our island waters. Hawksbills nest on a few small sand beaches on the Big Island, Maui, Moloka'i, and O'ahu. These areas are extremely important habitat for hawksbill turtles. Mature hawksbills measure about three feet long and weigh up to 200 pounds. Hawksbills use their long, narrow beaks to probe for food. Hawksbills feed on invertebrates, including some sponges that are toxic to most other animals. The meat of some hawksbills is poisonous to humans.

Leatherback (*Dermochelys coriacea*)

The leatherback is the world's largest turtle and can grow up to eight feet long and weigh up to 2,000 pounds. Leatherback turtles are seen regularly in Hawai'i's deep offshore waters, where they feed on jellyfish and other invertebrates. Leatherbacks do not normally nest on Hawai'i's beaches, although a rare nesting of a leatherback was documented on Lāna'i in 1997. (Unfortunately, the eggs were infertile.) The leatherback is the only sea turtle species that lacks a hard shell.

Threats

Fibropapilloma disease

Accidental capture, especially in long lines, gillnets and entanglement in fish lines

Collision with boats

Habitat degradation

Human disturbance of nesting areas

Illegal capture and killing

Marine debris

Sponsored by the Hawaiian Islands Humpback Whale National Marine Sanctuary with assistance from the NOAA Fisheries Office of Enforcement and the NOAA Fisheries Pacific Islands Area Office
Second Printing - September 2001



**HAWAIIAN ISLANDS HUMPBACK WHALE
NATIONAL MARINE SANCTUARY**
726 S. Kihei Road, Kihei, Maui, HI 96753
1-800-831-4888
www.hihwnms.nos.noaa.gov

